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Increasing Environmental Awareness through Children's Literature

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# Increasing environmental awareness through children's literature

*Using children's literature is a good way to support a themed study unit. This article includes an annotated list of books with suggested activities and discussion topics related to the environment.*

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Recent news events such as recurrent findings of contaminated underground water systems and the nuclear accident at Chernobyl are forceful reminders of our interrelation with the environment.

A renewed interest in an intelligent approach to coping with our environment is leading to more and better environmental education programs in elementary schools.

Teachers often feel intimidated by the term "environmental education" and feel unequipped to teach the subject due to a lack of information about what environmental education is and how to teach it. However, the topic provides an excellent opportunity for integrating wide reading into the content area program, and this at the same time eases the problem of how to approach the topic effectively.

This article discusses the basic philosophical tenets of environmental education and examines ways in which children's literature can be used to teach environmental education, either directly or as a springboard to other curricular activities.

## **Defining environmental education**

The primary goal of environmental education is to develop citizens who are knowledgeable about the world around them and involved in working toward a more livable future. Environmental education includes such basic understandings as: (1) people and wildlife have the same basic needs, (2) living and nonliving elements are interdependent, (3) people affect the environment while the environment affects people, and (4) people are accountable for their effects on the environment.

Careful selection of literature, in addition to helping students to better un-

derstand these concepts, can arouse interest in the environment. Children enjoy reading and listening to stories. The books often help them to understand and appreciate the environment by portraying cause-effect relationships, presenting vivid descriptions and accurate pictures, and providing vicarious experiences. Literature also provides a basis for follow up activities that reinforce and expand upon the book's meaning.

### **Children's literature in environmental education**

Using children's literature is one of the best ways to incorporate environmental education into the classroom. Children tend to respond better to literature than to expository texts, and consequently they are more apt to read stories than textbooks (Freedle, 1979).

Also, textbooks can be poorly written, and major concepts are often not thoroughly explained. Children's literature can help provide clear explanations of important concepts, often in narrative form.

### **Books for all ages**

Baylor, Byrd. *Before You Came This Way*. New York, N.Y.: Dutton, 1969.

Topic: Influence of environment on prehistoric life and culture

Grade level: All ages

For discussion: How does the culture depicted here compare with our present culture? What are some ecological and technological trends today? Looking at these trends, what do you predict the future will be like?

Activities: Draw murals depicting petroglyphs and write captions or brief texts to accompany them.

Baylor, Byrd. *When Clay Sings*. New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972.

Topic: Studying the past through ex-

amining pottery shards

Grade level: All ages

For discussion: How has technology affected our lives at home? At work? At play? How could you investigate the lives of ancient cultures from your area?

Activities: Create art that reflects our current environment and technology.

Bornstein, Ruth Lercher. *I'll Draw A Meadow*. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1979.

Topic: Life in a meadow; aesthetic and affective benefits of the environment

Grade level: All ages

For discussion: How does the book make you feel? What are some things that make you feel good?

Activities: Take black and white photographs of scenes in a meadow or other natural area. Read *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* by Mary O'Neill; match the poems with pictures.

Farber, Norma. *Never Say Ugh to a Bug*. New York, N.Y.: Greenwillow, 1979.

Topic: Purposes filled by insects such as maggots, honeybees, wasps, and crickets

Grade level: All ages

For discussion: What would happen to the ecological balance if these insects weren't around?

Activities: Make puppets of the different insects and have the puppets tell how they contribute to the environment.

Heller, Ruth. *Chickens Aren't the Only Ones*. New York, N.Y.: Grosset and Dunlap, 1981.

Topic: Animals that produce eggs (exquisite illustrations; poetic beauty)

Grade level: All ages

For discussion: Which of the birds have you seen locally? What basic needs do they all have? What

- types of animals other than birds lay eggs?
- Activities: Put out a bird feeder and observe the birds attracted. Observe and draw abandoned bird nests; pull apart nests and classify the types of materials used—are all nests similar?
- O'Neill, Mary. *Hailstones and Halibut Bones*. New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961.
- Topic: Feelings, events, and sensory experiences attributed to 12 colors; poetry
- Grade level: All ages
- For discussion: Before reading a poem, ask students to list things that remind them of a particular color. After reading, discuss items mentioned in the poem. What colors are predominant outdoors? Is a color always the same shade and intensity outdoors? How are indoor colors different from outdoor colors?
- Activities: Make a color wheel and develop a list of outdoor objects that go with each section. Collect fall leaves; sort them by color, shape, or size; make a bar graph of results. Make a rainbow with a prism or by placing a glass of water in direct sunlight.
- Wildsmith, Brian. *Professor Noah's Spaceship*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Topic: Pollution
- Grade level: All ages
- For discussion: What are some effects of pollution and overpopulation on the environment? How have specific species been affected by pollution? What is extinction and what are its consequences?
- Activities: Record types of pollution found around school, homes, neighborhoods. Make collages depicting pollution. Begin a clean up project.
- Books for primary grades**
- Barrett, Judi. *Animals Should Definitely NOT Wear Clothing*. New York, N.Y.: Atheneum, 1981.
- Topic: Physical attributes of animals presented in a humorous text
- Grade level: K-3
- For discussion: Why do animals have physical attributes that people do not?
- Activities: Investigate other animals' unique physical characteristics and have each student produce his/her own text and illustration using the book's pattern; combine the work into a class book.
- Booth, Eugene, and Duck Collard. *Under the Ocean*. London, England: Macdonald-Raintree, 1977.
- Topic: Sea animals, characteristics of the ocean
- Grade level: K-3
- For discussion: What are some ways life in the ocean differs from life on land? How are oceans different from other bodies of water?
- Activities: Use the pictures as basis for a language experience lesson.
- Keats, Ezra Jack. *Over in the Meadow*. New York, N.Y.: Four Winds Press, 1971.
- Topic: Animal populations living in a meadow; counting
- Grade level: K-3
- For discussion: Explore ways in which meadow animals live together and are interdependent
- Activities: Observe and count insects and other small animals in the schoolyard. Teach students the book's song and compose a class song entitled *Over in the School Yard*.
- Lopshire, Robert. *I Am Better than You*. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1968.
- Topic: Lizards and various aspects of their lives (a story about two

- lizards that compete in everything they do)  
 Grade level: K-3  
 For discussion: What parts of this story are real? Makebelieve? What are some benefits of the lizard's ability to change colors?  
 Activities: Expand into further study of reptiles and dinosaurs.
- McCloskey, Robert. *Blueberries for Sal*. New York, N.Y.: Viking Press, 1948.  
 Topic: How mothers care for their young  
 Grade level: K-3  
 For discussion: How are people's and animals' needs similar? How are these needs met similarly? Differently?  
 Activities: Cook 2 or 3 recipes using blueberries; students copy the recipes and take the "recipe book" home.
- Miles, Miska. *Apricot ABC*. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1969.  
 Topic: Alphabet letters are emphasized by the names of plants and animals and types of actions in a meadow after an apricot falls  
 Grade level: K-3  
 For discussion: What plant and animal life have the children seen on playgrounds; compare these with the book. What did children particularly enjoy seeing? Why?  
 Activities: Do a wildlife hunt on the school grounds and discuss what insects and other small animals are found. Adopt a tree that can be observed regularly for signs of change and animal life. Bring in apricots for students to taste and discuss the basic food groups.
- Milgrom, Harry. *ABC of Ecology*. New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1972.  
 Topic: Each letter of the alphabet represents an aspect of the environment.
- Grade level: K-3  
 For discussion: Compare this ABC book with Miska Miles's *Apricot ABC*. Why are they different?  
 Activities: Each child is given a letter and must find something outside the classroom whose name begins with that letter or that can be described by a word that starts with that letter. Make an alphabet book based on the schoolyard.
- Oakley, Graham. *Hetty and Harriet*. New York, N.Y.: Atheneum, 1981.  
 Topic: Two hens search for a perfect place to live  
 Grade level: K-3  
 For discussion: The need for appropriate food and shelter and how this is met in different locations; predator-prey relationships; food chains; how the habits of chickens are incompatible with the structure of the city.  
 Activities: Draw hens in different habitats; label the habitat's components (food, water, shelter, space). Draw pictures showing how our own basic needs are met.
- Peet, Bill. *Fly Homer Fly*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1969.  
 Topic: A pigeon's experiences in the country and the city  
 Grade level: K-3  
 For discussion: Compare the negative and positive aspects of city and rural life for wildlife and people. How are basic needs met in each environment?  
 Activities: Observe local pigeons and record observations in a journal; compare observed behaviors with those portrayed in the book. Role play bird life in the city and the country.
- Peet, Bill. *The Wump World*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.  
 Topic: The fantasy world of the

- Wumps is polluted by the Pollutians
- Grade level: K-3
- For discussion: What are examples of pollution in our own environment? How can we keep our world from becoming more polluted?
- Activities: Draw a polluted scene and the same area without pollution. Collect litter on the playground and classify the litter. Plant a tree to help keep the air clean.
- Tresselt, Alvin. *Timothy Climbs the Mountain*. New York, N.Y.: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1960.
- Topic: Two boys exploring the big mountain learn to appreciate its uniqueness
- Grade level: K-3
- For discussion: List the kinds of wildlife seen on the mountain; discuss why these animals aren't seen locally. Have children volunteer what they find beautiful about the environment and why.
- Activities: Make a collage of pictures that show beautiful environments. Listen to and record outside sounds for 1 minute. Compile a list of pleasant and unpleasant sounds.
- Wildsmith, Brian. *Squirrels*. New York, N.Y.: Franklin Watts, 1975.
- Topic: Diet, habitat, and physical characteristics of squirrels
- Grade level: K-3
- For discussion: Ways animals use their physical attributes for various purposes; the concept of habitat.
- Activities: Take a field trip to a park or zoo to observe squirrels; examine and record aspects of their life and habitat; propose ways their physical characteristics are suited to these.
- Books for upper elementary grades**
- Aliki. *Corn is Maize: The Gift of the Indians*. New York, N.Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976.
- Topic: The history and life cycle of corn
- Grade level: 4-6
- For discussion: Ways the uses of corn have changed; how we use corn today; how uses vary from culture to culture.
- Activities: Role play a Native American explaining corn and its uses to an English settler who has never seen it before. Plant corn and keep a journal charting growth and light and water requirements.
- Arnosky, Jim. *Drawing Life in Motion*. New York, N.Y.: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1984.
- Topic: Drawing wildlife; developing awareness of nature and motion
- Grade level: 4-6
- For discussion: How does an artist view nature? How do the technical terms used apply to other pictures? Other places?
- Activities: Practice the art techniques presented; write a text to accompany the drawing.
- Feder, Jan. *The Life of A Rabbit*. Chicago, Ill.: Childrens Press International, 1982.
- Topic: Types of rabbits and their reproduction, habitat, and colonies (narrative and expository texts)
- Grade level: 4-6
- For discussion: Compare rabbit colonies with other animal and insect colonies.
- Activities: Chart the similarities and differences between the various types of colonies.
- Johnson, Sylvia. *Inside an Egg*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Lerner Publications, 1982.
- Topic: In detail, the development of a chick from fertilization to hatching

Grade level: 4-6

For discussion: Try rolling the egg, then discuss how the shape might provide protection. Speculate on the effects of oil slick pollution on eggs.

Activities: Place a hardboiled egg in motor oil; remove after 30 minutes; crack the egg open and observe the inside of the shell. Incubate chicken eggs; record observations during and after hatching.

Mowat, Farley. *Owls in the Family*. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1961.

Topic: Amusing true story about growing up with 2 owls as pets.

Grade level: 4-6

For discussion: Compare the students' lifestyles to the rural life portrayed. Discuss how the owls got their food. What types of prey do they eat? How does the predator-prey relationship demonstrate the balance of nature?

Activities: Study the adaptations of birds (types of wings, beaks, feet) and how they are related to birds' lifestyle.

Pringle, Laurence. *Listen to the Crows*. New York, N.Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976.

Topic: The nature and variety of crow calls and the birds themselves (information book)

Grade level: 4-6

For discussion: Before reading, brainstorm what students know about crows; compare this to facts. What important contributions do crows make?

Activities: Invite a bird watcher to class to discuss techniques of bird watching. Observe crows or other common birds and record observations as a naturalist would (day, time, location, details of activity).

Scott, Jack Denton, and Ozzie Sweet.

*Return of the Buffalo*. New York, N.Y.: Putnam, 1976.

Topic: Comprehensive informative book on buffalo, including a historical perspective

Grade level: 4-6

For discussion: Identify human activities that caused a decline in the population of buffalo and how this trend was reversed. What animals are in danger of extinction today? What can we do to save the animals?

Activities: Make a diorama of the buffalo in an appropriate habitat. Contact the local wildlife agency for information on endangered, rare, and extinct animals.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1937.

Topic: Daily existence of a frontier family

Grade level: 4-6

For discussion: Describe experiences that Laura and her family had which you have never experienced. How is your lifestyle similar to theirs? How are family members dependent on each other?

Activities: Imagine living a frontier life—what would the day be like; write, draw, or tell what you imagined. List foods the Ingalls family eats that you eat; trace the food from its source to the Ingalls's table; do the same for yourself. Which has the longest route? Which takes more energy sources from origin to table?

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#### Reference

Freedle, Roy O., and Gordon Hale. "Acquisition of New Comprehension Schemata for Expository Prose by Transfer of a Narrative Schema." In *New Directions in Discourse Processing*, edited by Roy O. Freedle. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979.